

Women's Participation in Angola's Reconstruction and in Its Political Institutions and Processes

Executive Summary

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by

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INTRODUCTION

If Angolans are ever to put war behind them, they must realize that Angola's women are a critical asset for building and maintaining a lasting peace. In early 1997, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Mission in Angola hypothesized that greater women's participation was needed, and asked USAID's Women in Development Office (G/WID) for technical assistance through the WIDTECH project. WIDTECH assembled a team of four experts: WIDTECH's democracy and governance specialist, Marcia Greenberg; an anthropologist with expertise in Africa, agriculture and resettlement, Della McMillan; an Angolan lawyer who is vice-president of the Association of Angolan Women Lawyers, Julia Ornelas; and an economist who leads one of the most effective nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in development in Angola, Branca Neto do Espirito Santo. The team's goal was to identify barriers to women's participation and recommend opportunities for enhancing women's contribution to democracy and economic restructuring within USAID programs. The process also entailed building a general understanding of the circumstances of Angolan women.

The team was divided to cover two of USAID/Angola's [revised] strategic objectives (SOs):

1. Increased resettlement, rehabilitation and food self-reliance of war-affected Angolan communities (SO#1) and
2. Increased national reconciliation through strengthened civil society and political institutions (SO#2).

Over the course of five weeks, the WIDTECH team conducted research in five provinces (Bie, Cuanza Sul, Huambo, Malange, and Luanda). The SO#1 team conducted more than 300 interviews (one-on-one or in small groups), and reached another 200 people in larger sessions. The SO#2 team ran six focus groups to discuss Angolan women and the media, unemployment, poverty, violence, human rights and customary versus state law. The team also met with three gatherings of women in the *musseques* (shanty towns) of Luanda and with women from LIMA and ADEMA in Bailundo. The full team met with the Minister of Women to explore opportunities to cooperate in achieving her Ministry's objectives and those of USAID/Angola.

HISTORICAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF ANGOLAN WOMEN

- There are at least nine major ethnolinguistic groups in Angola, some of which are matrilineal and some are not. They share two characteristics that are important

for women: historic acceptance of polygamy, and the economic importance of women in supervising most crop production activities.

- Women in Angola are not a homogeneous group. Their differences depend on education and economic well-being, urban or rural living, government or UNITA affiliation, and stable or displaced residences. Program design and recommendations must take these differences into account.
- Throughout their colonial control of Angola, the Portuguese separated men from their families — first through three centuries of slave trade and then through an extensive, tightly orchestrated system of forced labor on plantations. Consequently, women have historically had to provide food and other basic needs for themselves and their children.
- Missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant, provided most of the educational opportunities for non-Portuguese Angolans. They educated Angolan men to be leaders. They focused women’s education, however, on home economics, nursing and teaching. To this day, most training that is proposed for women — even by women’s NGOs — is limited to sewing, embroidery and cooking.
- Although it was common throughout Africa for colonial powers to leave behind an unskilled workforce, most countries have had several decades to focus on human capacity development. In Angola, years of war have interfered with this process (except for a small and wealthy elite). While this poses problems for economic development, the need for widespread training opens opportunities to train women as well as men.
- For decades, churches have been critical sources for education, social services and information. Most women are affiliated with a church, and participate in the church’s *sociedade da senhoras* (or women’s group).
- Despite their neo-Marxist or egalitarian rhetoric, both the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) and the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) seem to have relegated women to “traditional” support roles, with only some few exceptions in leadership.
- War’s negative impacts on women have included a substantial increase in female-headed households and polygamy (which Angolan women say leaves them physically and economically vulnerable), a growing population of land-mine-injured women, and widespread reliance upon customary or neo-customary “legal systems” for lack of any effective formal system.
- The years of war have also had some positive side effects for women. For example, women separated from their home communities have needed to speak Portuguese as a lingua franca. In addition, women have had opportunities to develop skills and experience while taking over jobs and activities while men were fighting. Ironically, women’s struggle to survive seems to have counteracted tendencies toward passivity that typifies other post-socialist societies and to have fueled innovation and entrepreneurial activities.

BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Barriers

1. There is inadequate participation by women in all phases of USAID project decision-making.

While humanitarian and development organizations are increasingly sensitive to women as beneficiaries, they are still not engaging women in earlier phases of assistance — especially needs assessment, project design and project implementation. In many cases, the staff of USAID grantees lack sufficient gender sensitivity to develop culturally appropriate strategies for increasing women's participation, or to train new staff and to explain gender-focused approaches to their partners. All too often the hiring practices of USAID-funded private voluntary organizations (PVOs) tend to miss, exclude, or discourage employment of Angolan women.

2. Standard methods of disseminating information about USAID-funded projects do not reach Angolan women.

There are two impediments to effective communication, the means and the message. The means are flawed because there is heavy reliance on channels of communication that Angolan women do not use, such as radios, circulars to municipal hospitals and health posts, newspapers, and networks of NGOs. Women typically receive information in two ways: (1) from male leaders, such as *sobas*, church pastors, and school teachers; and (2) through their churches' *sociedades da senhoras* (women's groups). However, messages that reach women often lack meaning for women or for the intermediaries responsible for relaying the information. Rarely do the messages (for example, invitations to participate in programs or apply for employment) explain why women might want to respond.

3. A lack of reliable and gender-disaggregated data is distorting project design and implementation to the detriment of Angolan women.

Decades of war have impeded efforts to collect any data in Angola for five reasons.

- Both the government and UNITA have closed access to some of the areas they control, making it difficult to gain firsthand information.
- The collapse and disrepair of communications and transportation systems have made it impossible, dangerous, or costly to collect information.
- There are local language barriers to ensuring clear understanding of questions and issues.
- Frequent movements of displaced populations make it difficult to ensure that all populations are covered without duplication.
- □ The reality on the ground has changed constantly.

Beyond the general difficulties of collecting information, efforts to understand women's needs are only very recent. But in the last year there have been several good studies: a World Food Program study (Tall, 1996), the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children mission report (Diaz, 1997), a World Bank study (Declich, 1997) and a recent Angolan study, *O Perfil da Mulher Angolana no Desenvolvimento* (Cohen dos Santos, 1997). Still, however, there is a need to collect simple and up-to-date data, including the number of women-headed households and their needs, literacy levels, and mastery of Portuguese; women's skills and backgrounds for employment; and the needs of women in areas historically occupied by UNITA.

4. Angolan women typically cede decision-making power and control to men.

At first glance, the position of women seems stronger than it is, because women are represented in the highest levels of government, including the two very important ministers of Petroleum and of Fisheries. But beyond the circles of a narrow, family-based elite, there is a pervasive culture of excluding women from systems of control. Roles are distinct in Angola: women work very hard, but remain in a private domain and are not decision-makers. Men operate in the public realm, lead, and make decisions affecting all of society, such as making or continuing war. If Angola is to enjoy an effective democracy, it cannot exclude 50 percent of the population, namely women, from assessing needs, setting priorities, and allocating resources.

5. Efforts targeting women's political participation tend to focus on quantity rather than quality: the number of women's votes, rather than informed votes; and the number of women as political candidates, rather than their chances to win.

Women did turn out to vote in 1992. Yet interviews in villages and communities served by USAID projects exposed the fact that women typically have little, if any, information about candidates, platforms or issues. Although they know their own needs, they do not know which candidate will work for them. As for women in leadership positions, there are no women at the regional level as governors or vice governors; and at the national level, 25 of 215 members of the National Assembly are women. The way that power and resources are being allocated in transition suggests that women may have difficulty even maintaining that level of involvement. Beyond these, the greatest problem is whether additional women are interested in taking leadership positions, have the skills and resources to campaign, and can negotiate within the political parties to have a position on party lists to make them viable candidates.

6. Currently, Angola's formal legal system is virtually useless for women.

In Angola's post-conflict environment, people defend their rights, person and property any way that they can — often using guns, family influence, and money (graft). While the rule-of-law should protect all members of society, it is those who lack other means of defense who need it the most. Yet while the language of the Angolan Constitution and some laws may protect women, the application of the law does not. Angolan women know little or nothing about the laws, cannot access legal counsel or courts, and are constant victims of police brutality and graft.

Opportunities

1. A variety of women's groups, ranging from informal initiatives to new professional associations, offer critical bases for women's participation in Angolan democracy and in civil society.

Many women in Angola are already working together. Their initiatives lie along a continuum from informal groups with common interests, to interest-based initiatives, to community-based organizations, to NGOs. At each level, there is a critical need for capacity-building. The women themselves are eager for technical assistance and would make good use of it.

2. USAID/Angola need not start its democracy and governance programs from scratch, because the extensive network built by PVOs in the humanitarian, reconstruction, and agriculture programs offers a foundation for civic education and democracy initiatives.

Since USAID humanitarian and agriculture programs have reached at least 1.5 million people, there is a broad platform and network through which to spread and enhance democratic support. There are opportunities for democracy projects to work with the PVOs and their beneficiaries to leverage their impact.

3. There are "best practices" in Angola that could be emulated by USAID grantees designing projects to support democratic processes.

Although most PVOs do not have experience supporting the elements of democracy, such as representation, participatory decision-making, transparency and community-building, there are several programs that offer relevant experience. Creative Associates International, Angola's Fund for Social Support, Christian Children's Fund (CCF), and the U.N. Humanitarian Assistance Coordination Unit (UCAH) technical committees have been fostering participatory processes in Angola. Those programs offer valuable lessons about how to introduce Angolans to democracy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Regarding Reconstruction, Resettlement and Agriculture Programs

- To help Angolans achieve sustainable food self-sufficiency, USAID must substantially increase the number of women who are extension agents, leader farmers, and Seeds for Freedom test farmers. To improve the success of these programs, USAID should consider:

Mandating that PVOs place women in 50 percent of the positions relating to agricultural research and extension;

- Helping PVOs devise ways for women to work as extension agents in the areas where they live, so that the programs benefit from agents who know the population and farming conditions, and the women agents are able to work with the PVOs while remaining close to their families; and
- Insisting that all grantees' recruiting processes include contacts with networks of schools, women's religious groups, extension groups, and *sobas*.
- To obtain critical, up-to-date data on which to base plans for project design and implementation, USAID should enlist its PVOs and NGOs (and their field workers or extension agents) in simple data collection relating to
 - The number, socio-economic conditions, and farming systems of female-headed households;
 - Whether women speak Portuguese and literacy levels; and
 - The existence, structure, and purpose of any women's groups.

Such information is critical, but does not require large, expensive, time-consuming studies.

- When supporting infrastructure rehabilitation, USAID should insist that women be involved in the conceptualization of projects in order that they address women's needs (for example, to spend less time and effort on fetching water and grinding meal), incorporate women's experience and know-how, and involve women in construction and maintenance.
- When providing assistance for people who have been injured by land-mines, USAID must direct attention to the plight of disabled women in Angola. USAID should focus on their immediate needs by ensuring that they receive prostheses. It should mandate that 50 percent of prostheses go to women. But it is also extremely important that USAID recognize that unless disabled women have the capacity to access special transportation and healthcare, their ability to provide for their families will be diminished. USAID should support their long-term capacity to produce food, care for their families, and participate as active citizens by ensuring that they receive capacity-building within the Democracy and Governance (D&G) programs to organize as interest groups.

Regarding Democracy and Governance Programs

- USAID should foster the growth of civil society in Angola by supporting "proto-NGOs" (community-based initiatives or community-based organizations and interest groups) arising from its SO#1 beneficiary client groups (for example, midwives, disabled women, and relatives of underage soldiers).

- In a follow-up phase, USAID will have the opportunity to link the strengthened base of SO#1 community organizations to election preparation for women. This is an essential and invaluable base, because limiting D&G assistance to a handful of scattered women's groups would not achieve the country-wide impact sought by USAID.
- In the meantime, USAID's grantees should strengthen and build the capacity of existing NGOs and associations by working with them on specific projects.
- It is important to focus some effort and resources on the nearly one-third of Angolan women who now live as internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the *musseques* of Luanda.
- USAID-funded PVOs should be required to focus D&G programming on strengthening women as political candidates within the political parties so that they may win places in the National Assembly.
- USAID-funded D&G projects should reorient their civic education and election preparation to ensure that women can make informed decisions as voters.
- The U.S. Embassy and USAID should support the reestablishment of the rule of law that will protect Angolan women. Legal literacy is certainly important, and women must know about the law. But this alone will not suffice, because it is of little help to educate women about a system that is non-functional. Thus the United States should also help ensure that courts are functional, that women can enjoy fair and just assistance in them, and that women have access to legal counsel.
- There must be a concerted effort to ensure women's participation in USAID programs. Assistance tends to flow to those who are already in the system, which increases the disparity between a male elite and marginalized Angolan women. Without skills and resources, women cannot compete as equal and effective partners.

Critical Steps and Short-Term Follow-Up

The WIDTECH team recommends that USAID/Angola:

- Constitute a Women's Advisory Committee that would include the Angolan members of the WIDTECH team, a representative from the Angolan Ministry for Women, and representatives from LIMA and ADEMA, from the OMA Center for Battered Women, from the Methodist Church's Women's Committee, and from each province where USAID is currently working. The committee would bring information about existing initiatives and women's needs, while advising on design and implementation. It would also serve as a conduit back to Angolan women about USAID's resources and programs.

- Enlist G/WID assistance to run a Gender Guidelines Workshop for USAID grantees in Angola. The workshop should result in (1) sector-specific gender guidelines for project design and implementation, such as for humanitarian assistance or agricultural research and extension, and (2) staffing plans of action to increase the hiring and training of Angolan women.
- Lend political and financial support to the UNCAH/National Institute for Reintegration initiative to ensure that the processes of demobilization and resettlement include support for women. USAID should finance a short-term gender expert who would be responsible for convening the first meeting of a Task Force on Women's Issues and for ensuring that the Task Force produces a Gender Action Plan.
- Arrange for Angola-based PVOs and NGOs to share their experiences with one another. In particular, D&G and agricultural programs would communicate more effectively with rural Angolan women by learning from the success of land-mine awareness programs in reaching and educating women. The CCF collaboration with traditional *sobas* and *catequistas* should be a model, as well as CCF's methods of working through traditional organizations to distribute information to women.
- Require that its grantees report on women's participation in all phases of their projects and credit those who effectively integrate women.